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ABSTRACT

A beginning-level class in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) using the natural approach (NA) was conducted experimentally at the Institute of North American Studies in Barcelona, Spain from April through June, 1985. At the end of the ten-week term, the class of 17 students was given a communicative test and a structural test. A parallel conventional class was similarly evaluated. The NA students scored substantially higher on the communicative test than the parallel students but scored considerably lower on the structural test. Feedback elicited from the NA group indicated a positive reaction to this method, but with some suggestions for reintroduction of traditional classroom elements. (MSE)

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A Use of the Natural Approach in a Beginning-Level EFL Class in Barcelona, Spain

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SUMMARY

A beginning-level EFL class utilizing the "natural approach" (NA) was conducted on an experimental basis at the Institute of North American Studies in Barcelona, Spain, from April through June, 1985. At the end of the ten-week term the class of seventeen was given a communicative test, as well as a structural one. A parallel conventional class was similarly evaluated. The testing indicated substantially greateer communicative ability and substantially less ability to produce structurally accurate forms among the NA class members. Feedback elicited from the NA students indicated a positive reaction to NA methods, but with some suggestions for reintroduction of traditional classroom elements.

MOTIVATION FOR THE PROJECT

The writer had read with great interest the published work of Stephen D. Krashen, particularly his joint work with Tracy D. Terrell, The Natural Approach. The theories and research evidence presented in these works were entirely consistent with the writer's observations as a teacher, as well as his experiences as a languaage learner (Spanish) and as a language acquirer (Hungarian).

THE PROPOSAL

Early in 1985, the writer, a member of the teaching staff at the Institute of North American Studies, proposed that the Institute offer an alternative beginning-level course for those students who indicate an interest in participating in a class based on "natural approach" principles. The NA course would be designed to provide a classroom environment in which the students would be exposed to continuous comprehensible input in a non-threatening atmosphere. Overt teaching of grammar rules would be absent during the earliest stages and would continue to be deemphasized throughout the beginning course. The Institute management endorsed the proposal, announcing the new course offering for the Spring, 1985 term. An announcement was prepared and made availabe to all prospective registrants for the spring term.

THE INSTITUTE OF NORTH AMERICAN STUDIES

The Institute is a private, non-profit organization with a governing board consisting entirely of indigenous Barcelona residents. The executive director and faculty are natives of the United States and Canada. The Institute program is primarily English-language teaching, although there are some courses in North American culture, and many non-instructional events relating to various North American cultural, social, and political phenomena.

The course offerings range from beginning-level through advanced and include several ESP courses, such as business and medical English. There is also a sequence for children. The usual beginning class has 22 students,ranging from teenagers to senior citizens.

THE REGULAR BEGINNING COURSE

The Institute calendar consists of three ten-week terms extending from October 1st until late June and three one-month intensive terms from July through September. Beginning courses (designated "B-1") are offered during each of the aforementioned terms. A term consists of thirty hours of instruction.

At the time of the "NA experiment," the regular B-1 courses were based largely on a prescribed text, In Touch,Book One, Units One through Six. Teachers were encouraged to be innovative in presenting the prescribed material and in supplementing it. A uniform standard of achievement, as measured by an institute-wide final examination, was maintained.

THE EXPERIMENTAL CLASS

It was decided prior to the registration period that the "alternative B-1 class" to be offered in the Spring, 1985, term would be limited to 18 students. The registration process resulted in 18 enrollees: however, one withdrew prior to the first class session. The remaining 17 had a median age of 27, and inncluded 10 males and 7 females. Five had had some earlier exposure to English instruction, one of these five having failed the Institute's regular B-1 course twice. The other twelve reported no previous English instruction. They stated their reasons for studying English only in general terms: potential work- and study-related benefits, personal growth, and, simply, a liking for languages.

METHODOLOGY

The writer based the classroom procedure and outside assignments on his understanding of the principles and practices of the natural approach as described by Krashen and Terrell. The classroom activities during the 10-week period were designed to provide comprehensible input, to maintain the students' interest and attention, and to minimize anxiety and tension. Mime, pictures and realia were the constant accompaniments of the instructor's speech. Active participation by the students through total physical response-type activities, skits, and games were a frequent component. Beginning with a focus on our physical selves, our movements, our spatial relationships, and our immediate surroundings, our focus moved outward to the external world and inward to our thoughts and feelings.

All input was initially oral, but key words and phrases were presented in written form (on the blackboard) at the end of each class session.

During the first 15 to 20 hours the teacher tried to avoid any demand (explicit or implicit) for individual student production. Early student responses were either non-verbal or, when verabal, choral. Gradually, individual, voluntary responses were elicited.

For additional exposure to comprehensible input, the students were asked to spend at least one hour a week in the Institute's language laboratory, listining to taped dialogues from American Kernel Lessons,beginning book. They were instructed to listen to the dialogue, initially looking only at the pictures int the book, not at the transcribed dialogue. They were also encouraged to read the dialogues at home, thus to be exposed to comprehensible input in written form. The AKL situationes were also used as a basis for some classroom discussion. The students were also asked to purchase the Oxford Picture Dictionary of American English for use as a reference. From time to time there was classroom discussion regarding some of the scenes in this book.

There was no discussion about the structure of English until the last few sessions of the term, at which time a minimal amount of time was spent in presenting the third person singular form of the English verb and in pointing out the fact that English adjectives do not reflect number.

The teacher used no Spanish during the class sessions. The only communication in Spanish between the teacher and the students occurred outside of class and during a mid-term

"taking stock" session during which the teacher tried to respond to some student concerns and generally to reassure the students as to the ultimate objectives of the natural approach. In spite of having been told at the outset that there would be no emphasis on explanation of grammar rules, some students were concerned about the absence of such material.

TESTING

At the conclusion of the course, the members of the experimental class, as well as the members of a parallel class in which a more traditional teaching method had been used, were given two tests: one "communicative" and one designed to elicit prescribed sentence structures and word forms that had been covered in the parallel class.In the communicative test the NA students had a mean score of 65% and the parallel students 41%. On the conventional test, using the customary standard of grammatical correctness, the NA students had a mean score of 26% and the parallel students 71%. Re-scoring the latter test against a standard of comprehensibility of responses, the NA students' mean score was 69%.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

At the conclusion of the 10-week period, prior to the testing, the 15 NA students who had completed the course were asked to complete a questionnaire (in Spanish) regarding their reaction to the course. Thirteen responses were received. Ten of the thirteen felt that the course was what they had expected and that they had attained the level of proficiency that they had expected, while three were disappointed with the result. Six wanted to continue with the same method, three preferred to shift to a traditional method, three wanted a combination of the two, and one expressed no preference. With respect to future beginning-level NA classes, six suggested that there be no change in procedure, one indicated that it depended on the respective goals of the class members, one suggested including the use of films, and five recommended incorporating more grammar lessons, exercises, and/or tests.

CONCLUSIONS

The size of this experiment clearly precludes any definitive conclusions as to the relative effectiveness of this type of classroom procedure. At most, it had the potential of encouraging further experimentation with classroom techniques that seek to engender "acquisition." The writer feels that this potential was realized. The test results, the students' comments, and the writer's observation of the communication that took place in the classroom appear to justify, if not optimism, at least a willingness to continue a bit farther along this road.